

COMMENTARY ON HAFTARAH LEVITICUS

Haftarah Vayikra “Declaring Praise”

Isaiah 43:21-44:23

The third book of the Torah, known by the Hebrew designation *Vayikra* which means “and He called” (cf. Leviticus 1:1), was designated *Leuitikon* or “Leviticus” by the Septuagint translators. This is obvious, as a significant feature of the text establishes the Levitical priesthood. The priests of Israel were called by God to serve Him in a very special mediatorial way, with the commandments pertaining to the priesthood and its sacrificial system actually making up about half of the Torah’s instruction. As we ponder the different offerings, we can be reminded that following God’s Torah was more than just a mental ascent to a moral or ethical code. In past times, animal sacrifice indeed had to play a role within the economy of Ancient Israel, and reveal the sin nature of human beings who needed some kind of covering for their transgressions.

When the Sages considered the opening chapters of Leviticus, when looking for an appropriate Haftarah selection, they selected a section from the Book of Isaiah which opens with the admonition for God’s people to declare His praise (Isaiah 43:21). When guilt offerings were to be sacrificed before Him, the Lord required a witness to testify. If one did not testify of a matter that was known, he or she would bear the guilt of not declaring the truth:

“Now if a person sins after he hears a public adjuration *to testify* when he is a witness, whether he has seen or *otherwise* known, if he does not tell *it*, then he will bear his guilt” (Leviticus 5:1).

In the case of Ancient Israel, they should have known about the One True God via His acts of goodness toward them. There would have been no excuses for not knowing about Him, or somehow pretending that He did not exist. All of the corporate religious activity, personally worshipping Him through daily obedience, or having seen an operating Tabernacle—were things that were to make every Israelite totally aware of His existence. No one was to be excused from declaring His praises. Later, the Prophet Isaiah pointed out that despite the requirement of Israel to declare His praise through obedience to the ancient sacrificial system, there was something that was often lacking:

“The people whom I formed for Myself will declare My praise. Yet you have not called on Me, O Jacob; but you have become weary of Me, O Israel. You have not brought to Me the sheep of your burnt offerings, nor have you honored Me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, nor wearied you with incense. You have bought Me not sweet cane with money, nor have you filled Me with the fat of your sacrifices; rather you have burdened Me with your sins, You have wearied Me with your iniquities. I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Put Me in remembrance, let us argue our case together; State your *cause*, that you may be proved right. Your first forefather sinned, and your spokesmen have transgressed against Me. So I will pollute the princes of the sanctuary, and I will consign Jacob to the ban and Israel to revilement” (Isaiah 43:21-28).

Isaiah admonished his contemporaries for not following the instructions seen in the opening chapters of Leviticus, among other things. The people who were chosen by God to be a witness and testimony to the nations at large have wearied Him, not having brought the right offerings and sacrifices as required. Rather than doing what they should have done, the Lord noted how His people have brought Him their sins, iniquities, and transgressions—and have burdened Him as a result. Even though He rebuked them for this, He does remind them that eventually it is He who wipes from memory any of these transgressions.

Still, as you read further in our selection from Isaiah, you are reminded how God is not only the King of Israel—but He is also Israel’s Redeemer! Despite transgressions piling up, which seems to be an ongoing problem for His people, their descendants will eventually be witnesses to His greatness, no matter how flawed a witness their forbearers were:

“But now listen, O Jacob, My servant, and Israel, whom I have chosen: Thus says the LORD who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you, ‘Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; and you Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour out water on the thirsty *land* and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants’... Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God

besides Me. Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; Yes, let him recount it to Me in order, from the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming and the events that are going to take place. Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced *it* to you and declared *it*? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any *other* Rock? I know of none” (Isaiah 44:1-3, 6-8).

As our Isaiah section continues, the comparison is made between those who fashion idols to worship out of wood, versus those who worship the Creator. Obviously the comparison—considering the variety of possible uses for wood—is not much of a comparison at all. The same wood that composed an idol can be used to cook food (Isaiah 44:15-20)! How, after all, can an object created by human hands, formed no differently than the way someone would use wood for common purposes—be compared to an Eternal Creator? *A futile exercise, indeed.*

Concluding our Haftarah reading, we are reminded of two things. (1) The Almighty God who formed Israel to be His servant will not be a forgotten people. (2) And, this is because such a redeemed and forgiven servant nation was created to be a witness and a testimony to the rest of the world that He exists:

“Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant, O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me. I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud and your sins like a heavy mist. **Return to Me, for I have redeemed you. Shout for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done it!** Shout joyfully, you lower parts of the earth; break forth into a shout of joy, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it; for the LORD has redeemed Jacob and in Israel He shows forth His glory” (Isaiah 44:21-23).

Not only will this redeemed Israel declare God’s praises, and thus be a witness to the world at large of His goodness—but ultimately, God will display His omnipotence to the Heavens, the Earth, and all of Creation.

What does this teach us as redeemed individuals today, people who live the life of the age to come in the present evil age (cf. Galatians 1:4)? Are we not required to be witnesses for God, testifying of His works? **His most significant gift to us was that of His Son!** *We can be reconciled to the Father via Yeshua’s atoning sacrifice.* Do not at all think that simply because Israel has yet to be fully restored that the missional imperatives seen in this week Haftarah reading are only for the future. These words of Isaiah should have much more meaning, in fact, since the payment for our sins, iniquities, and transgressions has been made by the blood of the Lamb. Declaring through praise and worship not only our thanks—but also testifying to all who will hear of the joy of our salvation—should be something we do each day.

While we may not sacrifice animals today to atone for our sin, we do rejoice in *the sacrifice* that has washed away our sin. We have each returned to the One who has redeemed us! In time, knowledge of this will gain momentum and increase the numbers of those who too can experience the salvation of Messiah Yeshua! But in order for this to be accomplished, we are each required to be faithful witnesses who

declare praises to the Lord—and the availability of His salvation to one and all. As the Leviticus 5:1 commandment states, if we do not declare what we know, then we could bear the guilt of not being a witness to the truth as we know it.

Thank you, O Lord, for the reminder of what You require of us by reviewing these words from Leviticus and Isaiah. May we redouble our efforts to praise You through our declarations to a lost generation looking desperately for answers.

Haftarah Tzav

“A Soothing Aroma”

Jeremiah 7:21-8:3; 9:22-23

Our Torah portion for this week, *Tzav* (Leviticus 6:1[8]-8:36), continues by giving further instructions and explanations about various sacrificial offerings that the Lord required of Ancient Israel. More elaborate details about the burnt, grain, guilt, and peace offerings are given to the immediate sons of Aaron, who were designated to function as priestly mediators before the Most High. With all of this additional instruction, there are two important aspects of sacrificial offerings that can be reflected upon. First, there is the requirement to keep the sacrificial fires burning continually:

“Fire shall be kept burning continually on the altar; it is not to go out” (Leviticus 6:13).

Secondly, we see the Lord actually enjoying what is referred to in these passages, and others, as a “soothing aroma.” This was to emanate from the smoke of the sacrifice being burned:

“He then put all *these* on the hands of Aaron and on the hands of his sons and presented them as a wave offering before the LORD. Then Moses took them from their hands and offered them up in smoke on the altar with the burnt offering. **They were an ordination offering for a soothing aroma; it was an offering by fire to the LORD.** Moses also took the breast and presented it for a wave offering before the LORD; it was Moses' portion of the ram of ordination, just as the LORD had commanded Moses” (Leviticus 8:27-29).

Long before the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, Noah offered various sacrifices to God, delivered unto Him as a burnt offering. After the waters of the great flood had subsided, the Lord was pleased with the soothing aromatic smell of the offering presented to Him, and He declared that He would never again send such devastation:

“Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. **The LORD smelled the soothing aroma; and the LORD said to Himself, ‘I will never again curse**